

## Education and literacy

The World Conference on Education for All, held in 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, adopted a strategy for the achievement of universal access to basic education. Inspired by the Conference, the World Summit for Children made a commitment *to increase significantly educational opportunity for over 100 million children and nearly 1 billion adults, two thirds of them girls and women, who at present have no access to basic education and literacy.*

### EDUCATION BALANCE SHEET

GOAL	GAINS	UNFINISHED BUSINESS
<p><b>Early childhood development (ECD):</b> <i>expansion of ECD activities, including appropriate low-cost family- and community-based interventions</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enrolment of children in early childhood programmes has kept pace with or exceeded population growth rates in most regions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most progress has been among urban and elite populations and on formal pre-school programmes.</li> <li>• Countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia have seen a virtual collapse of public provision of pre-school education.</li> <li>• Limited progress on comprehensive family- and community-based approaches.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Basic education:</b> <i>universal access to basic education and achievement [completion of four years] of primary education by at least 80 per cent of primary-school-age children</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Net primary school enrolment has increased in all regions and reached 82 per cent worldwide.</li> <li>• Latin America has achieved its regional target of more than 70 per cent primary school achievement in urban areas.</li> <li>• The World Education Forum (Dakar 2000) endorsed a comprehensive definition of education quality.</li> <li>• Many countries have extended the period of basic education to close the gap between the end of compulsory schooling and the minimum age for employment.</li> <li>• Humanitarian relief now includes education as part of its basic package.</li> <li>• The HIPC II initiative now links increased investment in basic education to debt relief.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nearly 120 million children of primary school age remain out of school, especially working children; children affected by HIV/AIDS, conflict and disability; children of the poor or of minorities; and rural children.</li> <li>• Millions are receiving an education of poor quality.</li> <li>• At least one third of the 190 million working children aged 10 to 14 in developing countries have no access to basic education.</li> <li>• Funding for education interventions in humanitarian crises remains a low priority.</li> <li>• Implementation of HIPC II has been slow.</li> </ul>

Over the decade, the right to education has been reaffirmed internationally. The cornerstone of this is free and compulsory primary education, though the aim is also to provide increasing access to learning opportunities at secondary, technical and higher levels. For children, this education must be of a quality that enables them to develop their personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.

The balance sheet for progress on the World Conference on Education for All and the goals in education and literacy of the World Summit for Children is shown below.

GOAL	GAINS	UNFINISHED BUSINESS
<b>Gender disparities:</b> <i>reduction of current disparities between boys and girls</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The primary school enrolment gap between girls and boys has been halved globally from 6 to 3 percentage points.</li> <li>• Among developing regions, CEE/CIS and the Baltic States, Latin America and the Caribbean, and East Asia and the Pacific have the lowest gender gap (of 1 percentage point or less).</li> <li>• Middle East and North African countries have halved the gender gap, to 7 percentage points.</li> <li>• South Asia has greatly reduced the gender gap to 6 percentage points.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The gender gap has not narrowed sufficiently over the decade in sub-Saharan Africa.</li> </ul>
<b>Adult literacy:</b> <i>reduction of the adult illiteracy rate to at least half its 1990 rate, with emphasis on female literacy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adult illiteracy has declined from 25 per cent to 20 per cent.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The absolute number of illiterate adults has remained at nearly 900 million over the last decade worldwide, with the numbers of illiterates increasing in most regions.</li> <li>• Illiteracy is increasingly concentrated among women, especially in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.</li> </ul>
<b>Knowledge, skills and values for better living:</b> <i>increased acquisition by individuals and families of the knowledge, skills and values required for better living, made available through all educational channels</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision of education and training for young people in skills formation is increasing, with greater emphasis on life skills and livelihood skills.</li> <li>• New partnerships have emerged among education providers, industry and community leaders to promote relevant skills-based learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young people, especially in Central and Eastern Europe and sub-Saharan Africa, face massive unemployment and often displacement.</li> <li>• The majority of young people in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia lack the skills to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS.</li> </ul>

HIV/AIDS poses an enormous danger to the achievement of the world's goals for education in the coming decade. In the worst-affected areas, the demand for education is on the wane because families and communities are increasingly poor, dispirited and

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devastated. For the children of such families who are still in school, discrimination and fear affect learning and socialization. On the supply side, scarce funds are being diverted from edu-

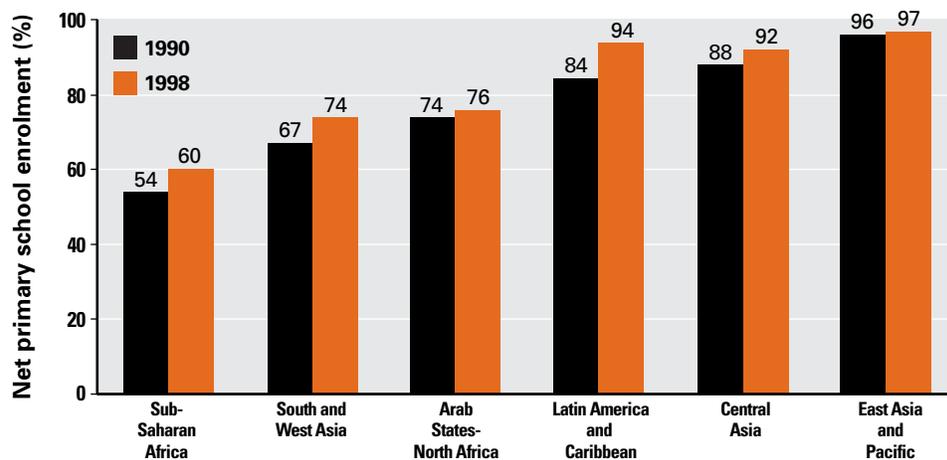
cation to caring for AIDS patients, and the number of qualified teachers is dwindling. Yet education is an essential need both for combating HIV/AIDS and responding to the needs of children, families and communities affected by the disease.

Education for All (EFA) will never be achieved if gender discrimination is not addressed. The largest single group of children denied a basic education is girls. This discrimination goes beyond the numbers visible in enrolment figures – it is reflected in inequalities throughout education systems and in society as a whole.

### Primary education

According to the *Education for All Assessment 2000*, the most extensive assessment of educational development to date, the net primary school enrolment ratio increased in the 1990s in all regions. Nevertheless, the World Summit goal of universal access to basic education was not achieved. Population growth cancelled out the increase in the enrolment ratio, so that there are nearly 120 million children of school age out of school, approximately 53 per cent of whom are girls. These are working and exploited children; children affected by conflict and by AIDS; children with disabilities; children of poor families and minorities; and children in rural, peri-urban and remote areas. Millions more are receiving an education of poor quality.

**Primary school enrolment (net), change over period 1990-1998**



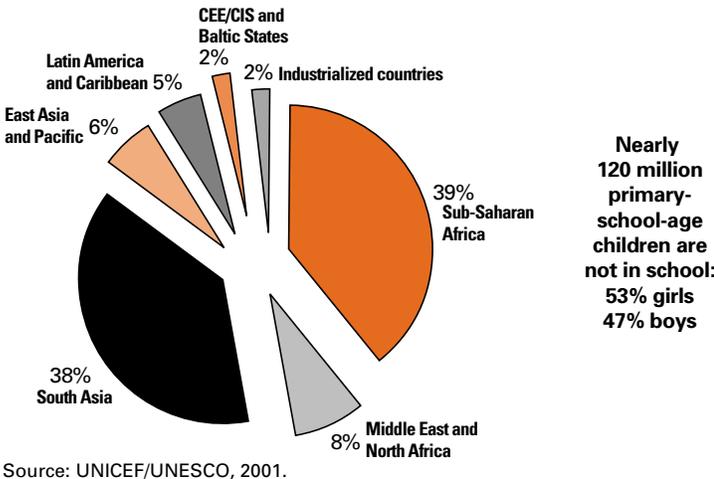
Source: UNESCO, *Education for All Assessment 2000*.

The breakdown of net enrolment ratios by region masks considerable variations between and within countries. Some regions, in fact, are barely keeping up with the growth in the number of school-age children, and a few countries are falling back.

The most notable progress has been in the East Asia and Pacific region, where both the net and gross enrolment ratios have moved close to 100 per cent in most countries. Participation rates have improved and enrolment is more age-appropriate, reflecting

greater internal efficiencies in the education system. Steady progress in the countries of the Caribbean and Latin America has cut the number of children out of school. Similar progress has occurred for children in school in the Arab States, although the overall number of out-of-school children has increased. South Asian enrolment increases have barely kept up with the growth in the population of school-age children. Completion rates have improved in some, but not all, countries of this region, and out-of-school numbers remain high.

The region experiencing the least progress, and in some cases actual regression, is sub-Saharan Africa. War and displacement, malnutrition and disease (especially HIV/AIDS) and economic crises have reduced the availability and quality of education services in a number of countries. More than 40 million primary-school-age children in this region are not in school, and there are very large disparities – by gender, urban/rural location and other factors – within and between countries.



**Children of primary school age not in school, by region, 1998**

Nearly 120 million primary-school-age children are not in school:  
53% girls  
47% boys

From a strategic point of view, certain key aspects of primary and basic education merit special attention. These include the gender dimension, education in emergencies, the relationship between child labour and education, ensuring that education includes *all* children, and improvements in quality.

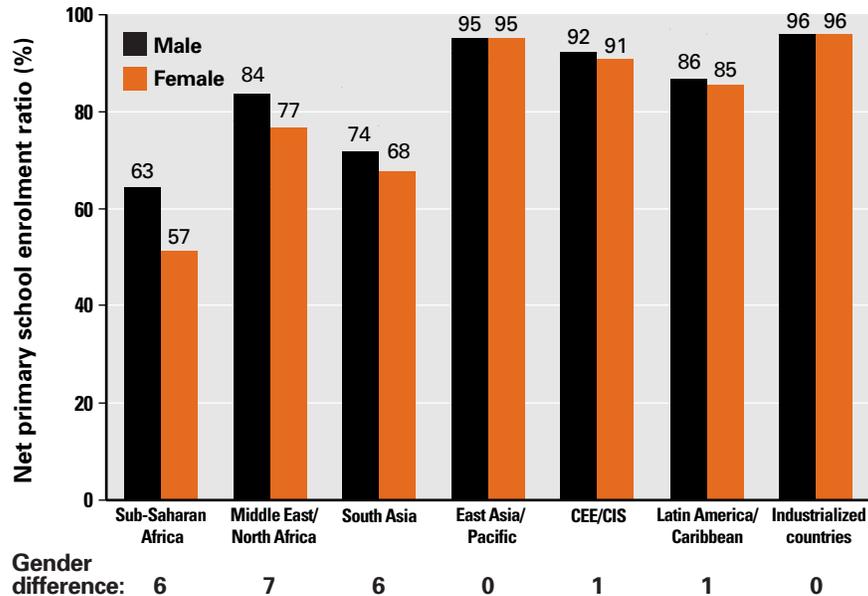
**THE GENDER GAP**

The ‘gender gap’ is the difference in school enrolment, retention and completion ratios between boys and girls – in most cases to the disadvantage of girls. The gap has narrowed significantly in recent years in the two regions where it was greatest – in the Middle East and North Africa and in South Asia – though there is still great room for progress. In sub-Saharan Africa, the gender gap has not declined as sharply over the past 10 years. Again, large disparities persist both among and within countries – the latter often hidden by national averages.

Even in countries where quantified gaps are minimal, inequalities in educational content, methods and facilities may exist, resulting in major differences in achievement. Thus the lack of an obvious gender gap can still mask great gender inequalities. In regions in economic decline, where enrolments are falling, girls may fall even further behind. Where traditional beliefs and practices remain strong, girls may be expected to

become housekeepers, child-minders and wives at an early age. There are also prejudices regarding the education of girls in male-dominated schools, violence against girls in schools and often gender stereotypes in school curricula.

### Net primary school enrolment, by sex, 1999



Source: UNICEF/UNESCO, 2001.

## Education and emergencies

Education must be an integral part of responses to emergencies, particularly as it can help restore a sense of stability in situations where children are likely to be traumatized. Even in the early stages of an emergency, educational needs should be identified. Improved educational response during emergencies requires more than the provision of textbooks and learning materials. Elements such as awareness of landmines, cholera prevention, environmental concerns and education for peace and reconciliation may also need to be included.

Since the mid-1990s, UNICEF, UNESCO and other partners have delivered the 'school-in-a-box' kit, containing basic education materials for up to 80 students, to over 30 countries affected by emergencies. New kits are being developed for use with very young children and to support recreation.

Increasing the access of refugee children to schooling is a key priority for many agencies, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Despite limited and uneven funding support, some progress has been made in education among refugee children. In Armenia, for example, a textbook project has recently helped reduce drop-out rates among both local and refugee schoolchildren.

## Child labour and education

Education is a central strategy for preventing child labour. Children tend to be involved more in work activities when education is not available or when the available form of education is not affordable, relevant or of good quality. Many children exploited through work stop going to school altogether. Others combine work and school but their ability to learn is seriously undermined by fatigue.

## GIRLS' EDUCATION IS AN IMPERATIVE

### WHY?

- Education is a right.
- About 53 per cent of the children denied this right are girls.
- Gender gaps are even larger in secondary school than in primary school.
- Female literacy rates lag behind those of males.
- This gender-based disadvantage multiplies the many other disadvantages disproportionately suffered by girls and women, including higher levels of poverty, malnutrition and vulnerability to HIV.

### WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

- A right fulfilled.
- Prospects for increased income.
- Later marriage and reduced fertility rates.
- Reduced infant mortality.
- Reduced maternal mortality.
- Better nourished and healthier children and families.
- Expanded opportunities and life choices for women (including enabling them to better protect themselves against HIV/AIDS).
- Increased participation of women in development and in political and economic decision-making.

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## INNOVATIVE APPROACHES

### **Fille-à-fille in Benin**

Under the girl-to-girl tutoring/mentoring effort, older primary-school girls are matched with younger girls, just entering school, who are likely to drop out.

### **Floating schools in Cambodia**

Floating schools that accommodate the seasonal movements of populations living in boat homes have improved access to primary schooling up to grade two for both girls and boys. A second teaching shift is especially helpful to girls, who often cannot attend during regular school hours.

### **Girls' education/child labour in Peru**

A UNICEF-supported programme helps working children who are out of school get to school and obtain a good education. So far, it has reached 30,000 girls and boys previously excluded from schools.

### **Complementary opportunity primary education in Uganda**

As part of the national strategy for achieving universal primary education, the programme focuses on developing complementary approaches to basic education for adolescents who have missed the primary grades. It now operates in eight districts. Achievement rates tend to exceed those of students in conventional schools.

### **Diphallana project in Botswana**

Diphallana focuses on pregnant girls and fathers-to-be who would typically drop out of school. The project provides free day care for the children of

teenage girls and boys and parenting classes for young parents. This effort is a part of national policies directed at improving the situation of pregnant girls.

### **Girl-friendly policy in Zambia**

In 1995, Zambia adopted the Declaration on Education of the Girl Child, placing special emphasis on promoting learning achievement and counselling. The Programme for the Advancement of Girls' Education, launched with support from UNICEF, is now being expanded nationally.

### **Community schools focusing on quality in Egypt**

With about 100 schools in operation and more to be established, the community schools project is beginning to expand. Teacher training promotes gender awareness. In the project areas, girls' enrolment has increased from as low as 30 per cent to as high as 70 per cent, the attendance rate is consistently between 95 and 100 per cent and student achievement on national exams is high.

### **Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee schools**

Through policies aimed at attracting and retaining girls in school, Bangladesh has made enormous advances in increasing the enrolment of girls in primary school – now exceeding that of boys. The innovative efforts of Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) schools, later adopted by other organizations, have been critical to this remarkable success.

Efforts to develop more relevant school curricula – to impart both life skills and vocational skills – are an important contribution to combating child labour. Similarly, non-formal approaches to learning have provided valuable lessons for educators and those involved with working children. Such innovative approaches include a South Asian programme for children released from carpet factories that offers free food, lodging and education, and another programme that has opened schools for former bonded child labourers, compressing five years of primary education into three.

The entry into force of the ILO Convention 182 on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour and national legislation in this area have been important developments in the last decade. A favoured strategy is the prohibition of any work that is hazardous or detrimental to the education, health or development of the child, combined with legislation making primary education compulsory and free to all. It is also vital to ensure that the age of completion of compulsory education coincides with the minimum age for entry into employment.

#### INCLUDING THE EXCLUDED

In 1994, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education resolved that ordinary schools should accommodate all children, regardless of physical, intellectual, emotional, social, linguistic or other conditions. UNESCO, UNICEF, Save the Children and other organizations have developed special

***Poor educational quality leads to high drop-out rates and wastes public and household resources.***

programmes to promote the education of children who are subjected to various forms of exclusion from society. These aim to more closely involve public authorities in the establishment of basic education and

vocational training for marginalized and excluded children – in particular street children, child labourers and children with disabilities.

#### QUALITY OF LEARNERS AND THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The health and nutritional status of children and their readiness to learn; the quality of the school environment, teaching and learning methods; the educational content transmitted and actually received: All of these are often still grossly inadequate. Ironically, the enrolment of more children in schools in the 1990s has magnified the challenges of enhancing quality. Poor educational quality leads to high drop-out rates and wastes public and household resources.

A study done for the World Education Forum, which reviewed results of achievement tests in literacy, numeracy and life skills in some 36 countries, showed that, in most cases, students are falling well below expectations. In 19 of the 29 countries analysed, fewer than half the children were reaching a basic level of numeracy by the fourth year. Even more uncertain is the extent to which children are learning the skills and values essential for living in an increasingly complex and often risky world – such as respect for difference, conflict resolution, compromise and tolerance.

Many economically advanced and industrialized countries, which had already achieved universal primary education at the beginning of the decade, have in the 1990s acted to improve quality and to help specific groups whose members tend to perform poorly and are in various ways 'at risk'. Of growing concern are children subject to multiple disadvantages. Various grounds for discrimination – gender, race, ethnicity, religion or language – can combine to exclude children not only from school but also from later employment.

Schools that are unfriendly, unhealthy, unsafe and unsupportive of children – especially girls – contribute to the problem of school drop-outs. Children enter school in greater and greater numbers, but then many problems arise that prevent them from completing the education they require. Family needs, for labour and income, may pull them out of school, while the culture and language of the classroom all too often push them out.

## **Secondary and technical/vocational education**

More countries are defining 'basic education' to include 9 or even 12 years of schooling and attempting to ensure that many more children achieve these levels. It is clear that more efforts must be made to keep children in school until at least the age of 15. Adolescents, especially in the critical years between the completion of primary school and the age of 15, face a multitude of risks, including early marriage. However, educational achievement varies greatly across regions, within countries and by gender. Data on non-formal approaches to education are not readily available, but gross enrolment rates for boys in secondary education range from 28 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa to 66 per cent in East Asia and the Pacific. The same rates for girls range from 22 per cent to 60 per cent.

In Western Europe and other advanced economies, including the CEE/CIS countries, the last decade was characterized by efforts to address youth and adult unemployment. Numerous programmes have been introduced in schools and vocational training institutions to improve the transition from education to working life. Unless this transition can be achieved, it is feared that social cohesion will be seriously threatened.

In many African countries, formal vocational preparation is high on the policy agenda – but youth unemployment rates are also often extremely high. With weak economies and no clear sign that the job market will grow, the effectiveness of these programmes is often questioned.

In general, the provision of education and training for young people and adults is increasing, and new partnerships have emerged among education providers, industry and community bodies. Nevertheless, coordination of the diverse programmes needs to be improved.

## **Lessons learned in education**

Much has been learned from efforts to achieve the goals of the World Summit and the Jomtien Declaration in the past decade. Despite the sometimes disappointing numbers and achievements, much more is known about 'what works' in education than was the

case a decade ago. What were once innovative ideas and promising pilot projects have become desired reforms and national programmes. Successful approaches to particular problems – such as in girls’ education and schooling for children in remote areas – have been developed, documented and disseminated. These include the following:

***Specific ways to get more children into school***

- Universal birth registration, to ensure that children have the documentation needed to enter school;
- Social mobilization and parental awareness of the value of education;
- School and community mechanisms to seek excluded and at-risk children and help them into school;
- Stronger school-community partnerships in school management;
- More flexible approaches to education, including multi-grade teaching, mother-tongue programmes and flexible calendars and timetables.

***Specific efforts to ensure that girls have full and equal access to basic education and are able to reach the same levels of achievement as boys***

- Advocacy and mobilization programmes at national and community levels;
- Programmes to eliminate cultural, social and economic barriers to girls’ education (e.g. child-care programmes for younger siblings, policies allowing pregnant girls and young mothers to stay in school, elimination of school fees and, where necessary, economic incentive programmes, including for orphans);
- Nationally and locally determined policies and programmes to eliminate all forms of gender-based discrimination, including gender-sensitive curricula and teaching-learning processes, and child-friendly environments.

***Comprehensive policies and programmes that enhance educational quality and promote gender sensitivity***

- Quality learners – children who are healthy, well nourished, ready to learn and supported by their families and communities;
- Quality content – with relevant curricula and adequate materials for literacy, numeracy and life skills;
- Quality teaching and learning processes;
- Quality learning environments that are healthy, hygienic and safe; that promote physical as well as psychosocial-emotional health; and that protect children from abuse and harm;
- Quality outcomes that are clearly defined and accurately assessed in terms of knowledge, attitudes and skills.

***Other key lessons from the past decade***

- Countries can succeed, even with low incomes per capita, if they have leadership commitment, use strategic planning based on realistic goals, deploy competent personnel and promote good management skills. Botswana, Malawi and Uganda in sub-Saharan Africa, and Bangladesh and China in Asia, are examples of countries that have realized significant gains. Broad partnerships are essential for progress.

- Teachers, administrators and others working in education must be encouraged to see reforms and new strategies as their own and not as a threat.
- Improving the quality of education requires sustained, comprehensive action. Short-term, narrowly focused projects do not succeed.
- In an increasingly complex world, schools must play an important role in promoting peace and respect for diversity, family and cultures, human rights and fundamental freedoms. In situations of crisis and conflict, schools can help restore stability and a needed sense of routine to children and adults.
- In providing education, both formal and non-formal approaches are needed. Whether supported by public or private efforts, they must be developed in the context of a unified education system dedicated to providing quality education to all children.

## Early childhood development

The World Summit for Children called for an expansion of early childhood development (ECD) activities, including appropriate low-cost and community-based interventions. In the decade since the World Summit, much has been achieved, though at very different rates in each country. There is, first of all, a greater understanding – among researchers and policy makers, donors and planners, practitioners and parents – of the importance of comprehensive high-quality care for young children. Early childhood care is also understood to be multidisciplinary, requiring the convergence of actions in effective parenting and health, nutrition and learning. There is far greater recognition of the fact that learning starts at birth. New scientific evidence has revealed how critically important the early years are to the quality of children’s later lives, spanning the personal, social and economic spheres.

***Experience shows that the best early childhood programmes deal holistically with the child’s interrelated physical, intellectual and emotional needs.***

The importance of parental education in the full range of care practices – in health, nutrition, hygiene and early stimulation – and of strong partnerships among families and community-based organizations is also now more evident. The gender dimension of ECD – the differential treatment of girls and boys and the process of gender socialization in the early years – is more widely recognized.

Great strides have been made in some aspects of ECD, especially in the reduction of infant and child mortality and in micronutrient supplementation. But the coverage of early childhood care programmes, although increasing, is very difficult to assess due to wide differences in the definition of such programmes and the lack of visibility of many privately supported activities, such as day-care services. In general, most progress has been made among urban and privileged populations, with a focus on formal pre-school programmes. Many of these are worryingly academic and should be focused more on the needs of younger children and their families; on play-based learning; on cost-effective and high-quality family and community programmes; and on the special needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. Experience shows that the best early childhood programmes deal holistically with the child’s interrelated physical, intellectual and emotional needs.

Efforts by NGOs, community groups and faith-based organizations are often the foundation of these programmes. However, more governments have recognized the need for clear policies and measures to help these initiatives grow – even if they cannot themselves provide much financial support.

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Thus, countries such as Jamaica, Jordan, Namibia, Nepal, the Philippines and Turkey are moving towards comprehensive policies on ECD that attempt to integrate programmes

dealing with different aspects of the young child – health, nutrition, stimulation and early learning – and that include specific legislation, programmes and budgets for greater service provision, as well as regulatory frameworks and training. These and other countries are also placing much greater emphasis on providing education and support for parents, often using participatory approaches and innovative communication methods.

Internationally, support to ECD policies and programmes has increased. During the past decade, for example, the number of ECD projects supported by the World Bank has multiplied. UNICEF and UNESCO are also promoting more comprehensive ECD programmes, as well as healthier, safer and more stimulating early education activities. Bilateral agencies and NGOs, both international and local, are also involved in ECD. Since 1984, the inter-agency Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, dedicated to

## INNOVATIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMMES

In **Jamaica**, the Roving Caregivers programme supports teen mothers in a country where more than 20 per cent of all births are to girls aged 15 to 19. Infant day care allows young mothers to attend counselling, job training and classes focusing on both academic subjects and self-esteem. The children's grandmothers and fathers also attend special sessions on child care.

A programme in the **Philippines** provides health, nutrition and early education services to young children in marginalized communities. Involving various ministries at the national level, and extension agents and Child Development Officers at the community level, the programme helps track every child's growth; monitors access to iodized salt, micronutrients, clean water and a toilet; and counsels parents on nutrition and child development.

In **Cuba**, a national, community-based programme begun in 1992, 'Educate Your Child', provides activities both for children – such as outings to parks, cultural facilities and sports centres – and for their families, including counselling and information. This programme, which reaches a large percentage of Cuba's 0- to 6-year-olds, is a major factor in the country's educational achievements at the primary school level.

In **Namibia**, NGOs and community groups are formalizing a support network of child-care workers and home-based initiatives for improving child-care practices – both in formal facilities and at home. Community mentors attend well-managed facilities on a periodic basis and then share their experiences with other caregivers.

In **Turkey**, the Mothers' Training Programme responds to the fact that few families can afford centre-based child care. Mothers and other family members are trained to create a healthy, stimulating home environment, and a video series covering child development reaches over 80,000 of the country's mothers.

improving the condition of young children at risk, has facilitated the work of many of these groups and communication between them.

As the new decade begins, more funding at both national and international levels is becoming available for ECD; better systems to monitor programme coverage and impact are being developed; more attention is being paid to the quality of curricula, the skills and training of caregivers and the adequacy of resources and facilities; and more effort is going to overcoming the still great disparities in the provision of ECD programmes within and between countries.

## LESSONS LEARNED IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

- All dimensions of a young child's development – health and nutritional status, hygiene, and cognitive, social and emotional development – are interrelated and essential for healthy and productive lives. Each dimension must be addressed, while taking into account all the others.
- Governments have an important role to play in establishing policies and standards for all initiatives, including non-governmental and private initiatives, to meet the multiple needs of the young child and the family – and in encouraging everyone involved to address these needs.
- Increased investment in early childhood development will save both public and private funds in the long run, through lower costs for health care, greater efficiency in the education system and fewer demands on social welfare and justice systems.
- Parents and primary caregivers, and particularly poor families facing multiple stresses, need support if they are to provide the essential care and stimulation that infants and young children need to survive, grow and develop.

## Adult literacy

The World Summit for Children called for the reduction of adult illiteracy to at least half of its 1990 level, with a special emphasis on reducing female literacy. The percentage of illiterates worldwide has since declined from 25 per cent to 20 per cent, which is a one-sixth reduction compared to the goal of one half.

Illiteracy is not a problem that can be swiftly eradicated: It

is the product of a complex interplay of cultural, socio-economic and educational factors. Assessing progress in literacy is itself a complicated undertaking: The very terms used to describe literacy vary, such as early literacy, functional literacy, visual literacy and so on. There is also continuing disagreement as to how to measure literacy – whether by self-reporting, grade level achieved, literacy tests or other means.

Yet, however measured, adult literacy is critically important. Adults need to be literate and numerate for their own benefit: Their inability to read, write, count or calculate handicaps them in innumerable ways every day. In addition, illiterate parents

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may not know how to encourage their children in reading, counting and other skills. End-of-decade assessments suggest that there has been some progress towards the goal of adult literacy, with modest declines in the estimated rates of illiteracy in all regions. But, given population growth, the absolute number of illiterates has remained at nearly 900 million over the last two decades.

***The education and literacy levels of parents, mothers in particular, directly determine their children's survival, growth and development prospects.***

Illiteracy is becoming more concentrated, however. UNESCO reports that in every region except the Americas women account for a growing percentage of all illiterate adults. Besides its growing concentration among women, illiteracy is also increasingly concentrated in South Asia and in the least developed countries of sub-Saharan Africa. The three largest

South Asian countries together are estimated to account for nearly half of the world's illiterate adults today, compared to around one third in 1970.

But illiteracy is not confined to developing countries. Numerous studies in industrialized countries show that large percentages of young people and adults lack the minimum levels of literacy and numeracy needed to function effectively. This problem has intensified with the spread of the 'information age', in which, for some countries, computer-based literacy is fast becoming a basic skill.

Beyond the numbers, other trends are important. NGOs have increased their activities in support of literacy, in part because interest and investment from national governments and international agencies have not increased. There is a greater appreciation of the need to understand literacy in ways that are more contextual and user-specific. Based on this understanding, there is now greater concern to ensure that assessment tools and monitoring mechanisms are more reliable and accurate.

#### LESSONS LEARNED IN LITERACY

- Illiteracy will persist – and replicate itself across generations – unless there is the political will to allocate the necessary resources to eliminate it.
- Progress has been difficult to measure because clear definitions and targets and assessment mechanisms are generally lacking.
- Formal national mechanisms to increase literacy have disadvantages, including weak coordination among major actors, unclear lines of responsibility across levels, top-down strategies, conservative approaches and bureaucracies. Nevertheless, the experience of China and Indonesia shows that concerted and sustained activities, even using such mechanisms, can produce progress.
- The strong involvement of NGOs and grass-roots organizations, especially those formed by women, and the use of community- and district-level structures are important for the reduction of illiteracy.
- Adult literacy programmes will not work where they remain isolated interventions, with little follow-up, divorced from the mainstream of education reform and innovation.
- The education and literacy levels of parents, mothers in particular, directly determine their children's survival, growth and development prospects.

## Knowledge, skills and values required for better living

The World Summit for Children called for *increased acquisition by individuals and families of the knowledge, skills and values required for better living, made available through all education channels, including the mass media, other forms of modern and traditional communication and social action, with effectiveness measured in terms of behavioural change.*

The past decade has seen significant advances in the use of communication to help achieve desired outcomes for children. During the last few years in particular, there has been

a marked shift in communication approaches, with added emphasis on the involvement of communities that were once defined as 'beneficiaries'. They are now recognized as full part-

***New information and communication technologies have great potential to disseminate knowledge, improve access to learning among remote and disadvantaged communities, support the professional development of teachers, enhance data collection and analysis and strengthen management systems.***

ners, together with governments and civil society organizations, in initiatives seeking to improve the well-being of communities and children.

Communication strategies are being developed far more systematically, involving participatory research and assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. In addition to using techniques of media communication and social marketing, innovative ways of using different media at all levels of society were effectively developed over the decade, as with the Meena Communication Initiative in South Asia. This was particularly successful in engaging and involving children, thereby developing from an early age core values such as gender equality and the need for all children to have an education.

## MEENA: AN ANIMATED APPROACH TO GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT

At the start of the decade, the Governments of Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan designated the 1990s the 'Decade of the Girl Child'. In support, UNICEF developed the Meena Communication Initiative, a mass communication project aimed at changing the perceptions and behaviour that hamper the survival, protection and development of girls in the region. Gender, child rights and educational messages are spread through a multimedia package that includes animated films, videos, radio series, comic books, posters, discussion guides, folk media (puppets, songs and drama), calendars, stickers and other materials.

The main character is Meena, a young girl whose experiences expose the discrimination against girls and women and offer positive insights from which families and communities can learn. Meena is full of vitality and dynamism, emphasizing a positive view of the girl child, not as a victim but as a person with potential. Specific topics are identified through field research and reflect the rights and priority needs of the girl child, including her education, development and health; they also convey life skills that enable girls to assume control over their own lives.

Evaluations of the Meena project have been overwhelmingly positive. People have embraced the series, not only for the novelty of the electronic medium but also for its strong educational value. In a study done in Kathmandu by Save the Children, Meena was the favourite role model for street children. In Dhaka, more than 50 per cent of those interviewed knew who Meena was and what she stood for. A similar initiative – Sara – was launched in eastern and southern Africa in 1995, to equal success.

## EXTENDING TECHNOLOGIES TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO LEARNING

New information and communication technologies have great potential to disseminate knowledge, improve access to learning among remote and disadvantaged communities, support the professional development of teachers, enhance data collection and analysis and strengthen management systems. They also provide opportunities to communicate across classrooms and cultures. Although these channels may not reach children in the most disadvantaged and marginalized communities, they can and do reach those agencies and individuals – including service providers and many NGOs – that do have access to such children.

The challenge ahead is thus to reduce the ‘digital divide’ – disparities in access to new technologies. Policies and strategies must focus on these and other inequalities, particularly in the parts of the world plagued by persistent poverty, conflict and discrimination.

## Evolution of education policies and strategies during the 1990s

When the Plan of Action of the World Summit for Children was being prepared, strategists were convinced that, as with efforts on primary health care and child survival in the previous decade, there was a need for an intervention that could rapidly overcome the many obstacles to progress in basic education. Going all out for universal primary education was to be just such an approach, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Strategies to achieve universal primary education included:

- Setting goals and developing strategies in each country;
- Setting and assessing learning-achievement levels;
- Giving priority to girls and women and other disadvantaged groups;
- Promoting elements such as ECD, use of mass media and other means of effective communication to complement primary education and adult literacy efforts;
- Mobilizing all organized elements in society – young people and women’s organizations, trade unions, religious bodies, social and cultural organizations, professional groups, cooperatives and industrial enterprises – to put basic education high on the national agenda.

Achieving the goal of universal access to basic education was considered an ambitious but affordable proposition. Countries were already spending more on primary education than on any other basic social service. The United Nations and

***Less than 2 per cent of international aid goes to primary or basic education, and the major recipients of aid for education are not the least developed countries.***

the World Bank estimated that some \$83 billion a year (in 1995 dollars) was already being spent on primary education and that the additional cost of achieving universal coverage was \$7 billion

to \$8 billion per year – roughly the cost of three nuclear-powered submarines.

Some countries, especially in East Asia, have made and sustained the necessary

investments and have succeeded in raising primary school enrolment to near universal levels. Overall, however, levels of investment in basic education have been disappointing, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

In addition, most international aid for education goes to university-level education. Less than 2 per cent of international aid goes to primary or basic education, and the major recipients of aid for education are not the least developed countries. Aid for basic education has increased only slightly as a proportion of all aid to developing countries.

Over the past decade, the World Bank has become the single largest source of international financial support for basic education. The Bank's targets for the 1990s included doubling the size of its education lending, increasing technical assistance and lending specifically to basic education and building partnerships around these endeavours. Subsequently, at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, the Bank increased its commitment to supporting girls' education. World Bank lending for basic education now places more emphasis on raising children's learning achievement. It supports inputs such as better-quality textbooks and instructional materials, improved teacher training, and school health and nutrition programmes.

Responding to public pressure, the Bretton Woods institutions have made greater efforts in the past 10 years to protect basic education from the reductions in public sector expenditure that often accompany financial stabilization programmes. However, the goal of universal primary education has been compromised in a number of countries that were

obliged to reduce overall social development spending, at least temporarily, in order to qualify for international lending assistance. This, coupled with a crippling debt burden, has made it impossible for many least developed countries and

even some middle-income countries to increase educational spending as much as they otherwise might have done. Basic salaries for teachers, classroom materials and school maintenance have all tended to suffer – and the quality of teaching and learning as well.

During the 1990s, reform packages in some countries led to the introduction of user fees where basic education had previously been free. This directly contradicts the commitments to free and compulsory primary education in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Experience in several countries in Africa shows that fees can be a formidable obstacle for poor families. In one East African country, cuts in educational spending related to its fiscal stabilization programme caused a dramatic rise in school drop-out rates, from near zero in 1979 to around 40 per cent in the mid-1990s. A neighbouring country found that, after it eliminated a modest school fee and compulsory school uniforms in 1994, primary enrolment soared by about 50 per cent from one school term to the next.

***During the 1990s, reform packages in some countries led to the introduction of user fees where basic education had previously been free. This directly contradicts the commitments to free and compulsory primary education in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.***

The right of children to free and compulsory primary education of good quality was clearly recognized by the World Education Forum, which took place in April 2000 in Dakar, Senegal. Those excluded from education – both from school and, within classrooms, from learning – are drawing greater attention. There is a better understanding of multiple disadvantages (such as being a girl and poor and working), of the causes of exclusion and of the value of flexible, non-formal approaches to reaching the excluded. The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative is a result of this heightened sensitivity.

Over the 1990s, the quality of education became a central concern. Enrolment in and completion of a certain number of years of schooling are not enough. Goals in these areas cannot be separated from concerns about the quality of education. The decade saw heightened emphasis on defining and measuring what exactly children should be learning. Educational quality is now understood to encompass:

- The health, nutritional and developmental status of children entering school and in school;
- The quality of educational content, teaching-learning processes and achievement outcomes;
- The quality of the school's environment for learning – the extent to which it is safe, healthy, protective and, above all, focused on the best interests of the child.

## Priority actions for the future in education and literacy

### BASIC EDUCATION

Government and civil society must work in partnership to develop Education for All (EFA) policies and link them to poverty reduction and broader development strategies. They must mobilize sufficient resources to ensure the provision of free primary education for all children. Countries must progressively but urgently seek to realize the right of all children to secondary education as well.

The wider international EFA partnership of governments, NGOs and development agencies should both expand and accelerate efforts. New efforts, such as

***The plight of education systems affected by conflict, natural disasters and instability – and, increasingly, by HIV/AIDS – must be urgently addressed.***

the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative and the Focusing Resources on Effective School Health (FRESH) initiative, as well as inter-agency networks on education and HIV/AIDS and on education in emergencies, must be

further developed. The 20/20 Initiative and debt-relief efforts in favour of social development have to be advanced.

Education planners have a responsibility to find the children who are not in school and to design programmes to include every child in education, guided by the principle of the 'best interests of the child'.

Specific targets should be set for the enrolment and educational achievement of

girls in countries and districts where the gender gap is significant. Integrated plans for achieving gender equality in education should be developed that recognize the need to change attitudes, values and practices.

The capacity for measuring and monitoring standards of achievement, both in literacy and numeracy, and also in a broader range of knowledge, skills and attitudes, needs to be built. Efforts to improve quality must go beyond the essentials of good, clean classrooms with adequate texts and trained teachers, to embrace children's readiness to learn and the necessity of providing schools that are safe environments for children.

Teachers are key to a quality education. They must have the recognition, the professional support and the remuneration necessary to enable them to do the job they need and want to do – and to feed and clothe their own families.

The plight of education systems affected by conflict, natural disasters and instability – and, increasingly, by HIV/AIDS – must be urgently addressed. Education must be part of the initial response within any programme of humanitarian assistance. Education systems and schools should play a larger role in preventing HIV/AIDS and in responding to its devastating impact on children, their families and their learning.

New information and communication technologies should be harnessed in such a way as to reduce rather than increase disparities in access and quality.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

The multiple needs of the young child must be met through more integrated approaches to ECD in parent and caregiver education, programming and policy-making. Even greater attention should be given to children aged 0-3 years and to their stimulation and early learning.

Programmes must be comprehensive, focused on the child, gender sensitive, centred in the family, based in the community and supported by national policies. Governments should establish clear policies in relation to young children and their families, leading to increased resources and an effective division of responsibility among government agencies and between them and civil society.

Special attention must be given to the development of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable young children, especially girls, children of minority groups, displaced children and orphans.

Better methods of monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of public programmes and local initiatives for young children need to be developed.

## ADULT LITERACY

Targets for the reduction of illiteracy must be clearly defined, and better indicators, assessment mechanisms and databases put in place.

Civil society organizations should be encouraged to sustain their involvement in literacy programmes, and governments and development agencies should strengthen their partnerships with them.

Literacy programmes should be an integral part of broader education action plans and should form part of sector-wide planning approaches.